What is Anarcho-Syndicalism?

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Anarchism is a political theory which advocates for the abolition of hierarchical government, and the organisation of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis. As Bakunin said:

freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice,
socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality.

Derived from the French word for Union (not necessarily a Trade based Union, it can include craft or industrial Unionism) *syndicalisme*, syndicalism in English, became shorthand for more militant Unions typically those that organised 'general workers'. The greater militancy of 'syndicalism' often lacked a coherent aim, or even a desire to get rid of capitalism. Revolutionary Syndicalism seeks to organise workers, often through Industrial Unions, while advancing demands through strikes and direct action, thereby gaining control of the means of production and the economy at large.

While Revolutionary Syndicalism is specifically opposed to capitalism and exploitation it often has too narrow a focus on the workplace to the detriment of other areas of struggle. It generally lacks a unified vision or goal for what exactly should replace capitalism and is ambivalent in relation to elections and the state.

Anarcho-syndicalism aims at uniting the working class as a class in order not only to win improvements within capitalism but ultimately to win the class war with its overthrowal through social revolution. Anarcho-syndicalism includes the specific aim of establishing libertarian communism through worker's control and self-management of industry and community.

The capitalist system that we are currently exploited and oppressed by has been described by Rudolph Rocker as:

A system which in every act of its life sacrifices the welfare of large sections of the people, yes, of whole nations, to the selfish lust for power and the economic interests of small minorities must of necessity dissolve all social ties and lead to a constant war of all against all.

While typical Trade Unions are organised in a top-down representative 'democracy', anarcho-syndicalists believe that union organising can only be effective through bottom up decision making. We believe that any sort of organisation from above is susceptible to becoming co-opted to benefit the whims of a minority. Any sort of meaningful change needs to come from us, the workers, who make up the majority - we decide for ourselves.

Too often we have seen General Secretaries or branch officials in the Trade Unions capitulate to the government and bosses when "acting on behalf of the workers." We have seen also how well the various iterations of 'Workers Parties' have represented us over the years. The warmongering and anti-working class policies of the British Labour Party speak for themselves. Not to mention how quickly Labour capitulated in the South when sharing office with Fine Gael during the austerity years. As Emma Goldman famously pointed out:

If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal.

We organise alongside other militant workers who agree with the aims and principles of anarcho-syndicalism. Initially, these are small groups of workers in the same area or industry, but these will eventually be built

into functioning Locals, which take on more Union functions, such as supporting trade disputes, struggles for the recovery of stolen wages, pickets, etc. At present we have a Local in Belfast, and South Ulster. We have members across Ireland - North and South - working to create Locals in more areas.

With far right politics on the rise globally, we are seeing these sorts of issues and ideas beginning to creep into our workplaces and cause devastation in our communities. This needs to be countered at every step - it is only by standing together that we can show these far right bigots their hatred is not welcome in our communities or our workplaces. Like the political elite, the far right want to keep us divided. By standing together in solidarity, we can win.

Militarism and war is tearing humanity apart across the globe, genocides and conflict in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar are driven by capitalism. War, militarism and imperialism will only be irradicated with the destruction of capitalism.

At present, we are witnessing climate change on a drastic scale. Sea levels are rising, each year sees an increase in environmental and natural disasters, and there are now dead spots in the ocean. Governments around the world are trying to greenwash the problem, acting like capitalism can treat climate change, rather than being the single biggest cause. Nor do we think that climate change can fixed by Green Party governments or well-meaning Socialists.

There is another way, though. Through defeating Capitalism and abolishing state power, anarcho-syndicalism can push forward with the social and environmental revolution. Libertarian communism is the path to emancipation for all.

The revolutionary unions, in the view of the anarchists, are not only organs of the struggle against the contemporary structure; they are also the cells of the future society.

Gregori Maximoff.

What do anarcho-syndicalists do?

As anarcho-syndicalists, we are engaged in a number of workplace and community struggles. Examples are as follows:

- Working conditions - from issues with pay to working hours to employee health and wellbeing.
- Community organising - this includes issues around housing, against racism, environmental concerns, or public services.
- Strike and occupation support - whether that be manning pickets, raising funds, or providing supplies.
- Worker support - providing advice and support to individual victimised workers.
- Education - on labour struggles and history, anti-war or anti-fascist issues, climate change, and other issues that affect workers.
- Distributing propaganda - producing bulletins, statements, etc. in order to spread the ideas of solidarity, direct action, mutual aid and worker's self-management.

The three principles of anarcho-syndicalism are solidarity, direct action and self-organising. Together we can win!

Like what you read? This leaflet was produced by Organise! Friends of the International Worker's Association. We are active in both the North and the South of Ireland. If you want to learn more, you can read our bulletins, and other propaganda on our website.

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